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ABSTRACT

The Natural Approach to teaching second language communication skills is described. The Natural Approach is based on the proposition that acquirers in natural situations go through three stages: comprehension, early speech, and speech emergence. Provision of comprehensible input allows beginning learners to teach themselves how to speak. Thus, listening comprehension is the most important skill for beginning language learners because it allows speech to develop. Three techniques for teaching listening comprehension skills through the Natural Approach are detailed: total physical response in which learners respond to commands; description of the characteristics of people and objects in the immediate environment; and description of the contents of magazine pictures. The purpose of the techniques is to give comprehensible input in a second language without requiring the learners to speak. (RW)

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TEACHING COMPREHENSION SKILLS IN THE NATURAL APPROACH

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The Natural Approach is not really new. I don't think that any approach to the teaching of second and foreign languages is new if we look back over the centuries of language teaching. It may be new in the sense that it combines some interesting ideas and techniques in new ways and it may be new for many people in current teaching contexts. Perhaps for these reasons I think that it is worth looking at.

Foreign language teachers are often still embroiled in controversies of whether it is possible to teach communication skills in the classroom. ESL teachers have at least advanced to the point where we ask ourselves, "How can we teach communication skills better, faster, and more effectively?" These are the questions that Natural Approach tries to answer.

Natural Approach techniques were originally designed to teach communication skills in a new language to beginners, not to students who already speak a new language but need to learn to write essays in that language. The basic tenet of Natural Approach is that acquirers in "natural" situations go through three stages on their way to gaining proficiency in communication

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skills: (1) the comprehension stage, (2) the early speech stage, and (3) the speech emerges stage. The idea is that acquirers, if they get enough comprehensible input, will teach themselves how to talk. For this reason, creating communicative situations in the classroom in which the student is "bathed" in comprehensible input is the goal for students in the first two stages. And it is also for this reason that we claim that of all the language skills the listening comprehension skill is the most important to beginners. First, available evidence shows that it is the skill which underlies speech, and second, if one does not comprehend responses from native speakers, then production skills will be of reduced value. I've often observed students who can generate sentences by applying the rules that they have learned in their language class. They say what they want to say, but all too often they don't understand the responses of the native speaker. So listening comprehension is a skill that needs to be developed for its own sake, and in addition I believe that this is the skill that allows the speech skills to develop.

Unfortunately we haven't paid much attention to teacher techniques for developing the students' skills in using listening comprehension strategies. Most of the materials at the publisher's exhibits, for example, are focussed on speaking, reading, and writing skills. We're lucky in the ESL profession that we have a lot of good materials available to help us develop these skills. In addition I'm very impressed with some of the new materials coming out since we are starting to get some materials to help teach the comprehension skills. But one of the problems in teaching listening skills is that there are a lot of elements that contribute to the understanding of speech. And these elements unfortunately can't come through on a tape recorder; students need to hear and see a person interacting with another person. So no matter what material we publish, it remains a fact that even accompanied by tape recordings books cannot teach people to comprehend speech in natural communicative settings: only a person in personal interactions can teach students to understand.

When parents and caretakers teach language to children what they're really doing is teaching the children to understand. Recent research has looked at parents' and caretakers' speech to see what they do to their speech to insure children understand what they say. That's what I am going to try to do with my speech today when I speak to you in Dutch -- insure that you understand. To do this, I will use the same sorts of techniques and modifications of my speech that caretakers use when speaking with children.

When children learn their first language we give them a long period before we expect them to say anything. They are given anywhere from six months to a year to concentrate almost solely on comprehension strategies. They use this time to build confidence that they can interpret the speech they hear. Not that they understand every word -- not at all -- but they can

follow what's going on and what's being asked of them.

Older children, for example, those aged seven, eight, or nine, also concentrate on listening strategies when they are put in a new culture and have to cope with a new language. In natural situations they are, just like infants, given quite a bit of time to learn to comprehend. They listen on the playground, they listen at school, they listen in the community around them and they get used to understanding before they attempt much speech. In fact, many researchers have reported that children acquiring a new language will delay speaking anywhere from one month to six months in their new environment before they feel comfortable and ready to speak.

Adults who are faced with acquiring a new language in a natural situation behave much as children do. They intuitively know that the first thing one does in acquiring another language is to "shut up" and become as invisible as possible. We pretend to native speakers that we understand what is going on, and we listen. We listen a lot for many days before we finally feel comfortable enough to attempt to produce our first phrases. And when we do finally speak, it will not be in complete sentences. We'll use fragments, words, things we feel comfortable with, things that we've heard frequently enough to say without a great deal of mental effort. We are simply courting trouble by taking a language book and looking up a correct phrase to match the situation since the chances are that we will not understand the response we get. What we do is to work on comprehension first. And when we feel comfortable we start speaking. In the Natural Approach what we've tried to do is to develop these "natural" techniques or strategies that allow us to start with comprehension, not with production.

I will mention three techniques that we use in Natural Approach to teach listening comprehension skills.

First there is TPR, Total Physical Response. Asher's contribution to language teaching is finally being recognized and now most teachers, at least in California, use TPR at least to some extent. It really does work and it's fun. We're doing TPR (and other Natural Approach techniques) now with languages such as Arabic, Vietnamese, Ilocano, Hebrew, Japanese, Mandarin and others. I will admit that the acquisition of comprehension goes a bit slower in some of these languages than in the Dutch I use in my demonstration but TPR definitely gets good results.

Professor Terrell gives a demonstration at this point in his talk, speaking in Dutch and using TPR. He makes commands such as: stand up, sit down, turn around, put your hand on your head, raise your hand(s), lower your hand(s), put your hand over your eye, put your right hand on your left eye, put your left hand on your mouth, put both hands on your nose, put your left hand on your right shoulder, touch your left leg, raise your right leg, etc.

The trick to making TPR techniques (and any other listening comprehension techniques) a success lies in the way the instructor presents the commands. They must be modeled well with an intonation which stresses the most important words in the command. Then they must be introduced at such a pace that the students can have enough practice with each command before a new one is introduced. The technique of weaving review with new material is not difficult, but if it is not done well the whole technique fails.

Let us now try another technique which uses the characteristics of people and objects in the immediate environment. The overt purpose of this activity will be to learn the names of other students in the group. To do this we will have to look carefully at each student and think of something we can associate with that student to help us remember the name. Anything which we can associate with the student will be of help, perhaps the hair color, what the student is wearing, facial characteristics (a beard, a moustache) and so forth. In all cases the question which we will ask will have the form: what is the name of the student who____ _____?

For example: My name is Terry. I'm the teacher in this class. You-all are not teachers, you're students. You're the students and I'm the teacher. Do you understand? I'm the teacher and my name is Terry. What is the name of the teacher of this class? (class response -- Terry). Good. Now let's look at this student. She's a woman. This student is a man. (pointing). He's a man, he's a man, he's a man, but she's a woman, she's also a woman, she's a woman. Do you understand? Man, woman? Good. This student is a woman. She has long, brown hair. This is the student with long, brown, hair. What is your name (Student replies Martha). Martha. Let's remember her name. Her name is Martha and she has long, brown hair. What is the name of the student with long brown hair? (Martha) And what is the name of the teacher? (Terry) Good. What is your name (looking at a new student)? (Tom). Class, look at Tom. Tom has short, brown hair and a beard. His name is Tom and he has a beard. What is the name of the student with short brown hair and a beard? (Tom) And what is the name of the woman with long, brown hair? (Martha) And the name of the teacher is _____ (Terry). Look at this student. Does she have long brown hair? (Students respond with no in English, teacher says no in Dutch several times). No, she has short hair, short blond hair. What is your name? (Linda) Her name is Linda. Linda is the student in our class with short blond hair. What is the name of the woman with short brown hair? (Martha) And what is the name of the man with a beard? (Tom) Does the teacher in this class have a beard? (No) Does Linda have a beard? (No). Who has a beard? (Tom) Is there another person in this class with a beard? (Students respond with yes in English, teacher repeats yes in Dutch several times; students look for and point at a man with a beard). Yes, he has a beard. What is your name? (Jerry). His name is Jerry. He has a beard and a moustache. He also wears glasses. Do I wear glasses? (No) Does Linda wear glasses? (No). Who wears glasses? (Jerry)

Who has a beard? (Jerry) and _____ (Tom). There are two men in the class with beards, (pointing to each), one, two. There are two. Does the teacher have a beard? (No). What is the name of the student with short blond hair (Linda)? What is the name of the student who has long brown hair? (Martha).....

How much can the teacher make the students understand? Probably not 70% or more of the Dutch, but rather 70% of the ideas. This is important. The development of listening strategies involves primarily the idea of partial comprehension -- we listen for general meaning, not the specific meaning of every word we hear. Why was this input in Dutch comprehensible? That is, what did I do to make it comprehensible? I replied on three important elements: context (everything I said had real referents which one can easily see and react to), intent (one knows before I started what I was going to talk about and what I expected), and key vocabulary; I emphasized by intonation and pauses the key words, the content words, the words needed to make the input comprehensible. The illusion is that we understand everything when in reality we understand only a part of the Dutch words. But of course this is exactly how acquirers in natural situations begin the acquisition of comprehension skills.

The final technique which I will illustrate this morning relies on the use of simple pictures cut from magazines. For this particular technique these pictures work much better than the line drawings which are often used in language classes to focus on a single word or phrase. I will describe each picture and then pass it out to a person in the audience. All you have to do is to remember who has which picture.

Speaking in Dutch, Professor Terrell gives a demonstration: This is a picture. Look at this picture. Can everyone see the picture? This is a picture of a man. Can you see the man? This is not a woman, but a man. He has short brown hair. What does he have in his mouth? (Students respond "cigarette" in English) yes, that's right. He has a cigarette in his mouth. He is smoking a cigarette. This is a picture of a man who is smoking a cigarette. And this picture is for...What is your name? (Betty). Fine, the picture of the man smoking the cigarette is for Betty. Can everyone see Betty? She has the picture of the man smoking the cigarette. Ok. Now the question. What is the name of the student with the picture of the man smoking a cigarette? (Betty). Right. Betty has the picture of the man smoking the cigarette.

Let's look at another picture. There is a woman in this picture. Is that right? Is she a woman? (Yes). Fine. Does she have long hair? (Nee, most of class now responds with yes and no in Dutch). No, she has short hair. Is she smoking a cigarette? (Nee) No. Look at her hand. She has a glass in her hand. She's holding a glass in her hand. And in the glass is wine. So this is the picture of the woman drinking a glass of wine. And this picture is for... What is your name? (Jim) ...for Jim. Look at Jim, class, he now has the picture of the

woman who is drinking a glass of wine. And who has the picture of the man smoking the cigarette? And the woman drinking a glass of wine?

The demonstration continues with about 15 pictures in this way.

The purpose of this workshop has been to introduce you to the Natural Approach. I have said that Natural Approach posits that acquirers will go through three stages of natural language acquisition: listening, early speech and speech emerges. What I have tried to do is to demonstrate to you using Dutch three of the techniques we use in the first of these three stages, techniques which allow for the development of listening comprehension strategies. We used Dutch with Asher's TPR , with descriptions of the students in this group (naming technique), and with pictures cut from magazines. In all cases my purpose was to give you comprehensible input without requiring you to speak. With TPR, speech was unnecessary because you could respond with action. With the other two techniques you could respond with just the names of each other.

More information about Natural Approach, and in particular about the other two stages for beginners can be found in Natural Approach: Language Acquisition in the Classroom (S. Krashen and T. Terrell), published this year by Allemany Press (San Francisco) and Pergamon Press (London).